Weather / Traffic
Classified
Homes
Shopping center
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Special sections
News / Home

Local
• Chicago
• North Shore
• West
• Near West
• North
• Near Northwest
• Northwest
• South/Southwest
Nation/World
• America at War
Editorials & Opinion
• Voice of the People
• Commentary
• Perspective
Columnists
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• Eric Zorn
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Obituaries
Community info
Corrections
Archives

Business
Technology
Sports
Leisure
Travel
Registration
Today's newspaper
Customer service

Gauging a threat to air travel

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When terrorists fired two shoulder-launched missiles at an Israeli jetliner over Mombasa, Kenya, last November, it was more than just another terrorist attack. It was said to be the first such attack against a civilian aircraft outside a "war zone." As such, the warning bells went off--again--in Washington. With an estimated 500,000 to 700,000 shoulder-launched missiles in circulation around the world, and an unknown number in terrorists' hands, it's not hard to imagine that there is a real, if indefinable, threat.

That prompted calls from several members of Congress to spend billions to outfit commercial jetliners with anti-missile technology. The Transportation Security Administration dispatched teams to 22 of the largest airports, including O'Hare, to further assess how vulnerable they may be to such attacks. But that's a tall order: The danger zone of missile attacks stretches about 300 square miles around aircraft taking off and landing, according to declassified testimony released after a recent House Aviation Subcommittee hearing.

Just reading about the missiles is enough to make a white-knuckle flier blanch. The heat-seeking missiles are handy, portable, relatively inexpensive and not very hard to operate. Depending on the model, the missiles are effective in hitting slow-moving targets up to five miles away, and as far up as 15,000 feet. Dozens of countries, including the United States, have produced thousands of these missiles over the years, and they're thought to be effective for at least 22 years, according to Aviation International News.

Though there are no specific threats that have been identified in the United States, untold numbers of the shoulder-launched missiles are in the hands of as many as 27 guerrilla and terrorist groups, according to Jane's Intelligence Review. The U.S. itself supplied Stinger missiles to Afghan rebels in their fight against the Soviets in the 1980s, so it's likely that some are now in the hands of Al Qaeda.

That means the possibility of a terrorist attack using the launchers in the United States cannot be dismissed. Since 1978, there have been 35 shoulder-launched missile attacks on civilian aircraft, said Adm. James Loy, head of the Transportation Security Administration, in testimony before a House subcommittee. Twenty-four of those planes crashed, killing more than 500 people, he said.

All of those attacks, excluding the Mombasa attack in November, came in what Loy described as "war-torn areas with active insurgent groups." Attacks have been reported in Africa, Afghanistan, Asia and Central America.

Notably, however, most of those deaths were on smaller, propeller aircraft; of the six attacks on larger, multi-engine jets, five planes sustained little or no damage, Loy said. Still, a Boeing 727 was shot down in 1998 by rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo, killing 40.

Outfitting the entire fleet of commercial airlines--some 6,000 or so planes--could cost up to $10 billion,

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according to estimates by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Rep. Steve Israel (D-N.Y.), who introduced legislation earlier this year to outfit all commercial jets with anti-missile protections.

What is not calculated is what it would cost if such measures were not taken and a missile attack were successful against an American airliner. The damage to this nation's transportation system, and its psyche, would obviously be huge. Suffice to say, $10 billion would then seem to be a pittance, if it meant that Americans could again feel relatively safe on commercial jetliners.

There's another figure to think about here. The cost of a new jumbo jet can reach $200 million or more. Surely that's an investment worth protecting with a system that one company, Northrop Grumman, has estimated would initially cost about $2 million a plane. (That cost could drop to $1 million if more planes were retrofitted.) The airlines are in no position to spend such sums. They say it's the government's duty to assess the threat. At least one airline trade association spokesman has said he fears travelers will be frightened off simply by talk of installing anti-missile equipment on commercial jets. But that's a pre-Sept. 11 head-in-the-sand approach. It's more likely that dealing with the threat will comfort travelers, not alarm them.

In some ways, the threat of a missile attack is like many potential threats in the post-Sept. 11 era. It is unknowable. There's credible evidence that suggests terrorists have these weapons and are probably waiting for an opportunity to use them. The fact that they have not yet done so is not comforting, nor is it predictive.

Right now, federal officials are studying and analyzing different anti-missile technologies, weighing their costs and benefits. Some systems have been in place for years on military aircraft, and Israel apparently is using similar systems for its commercial fleet. It's safe to say that no technology is 100 percent foolproof, and that American officials are right in working with other countries to shut down the black market in these missiles and reduce the threat.

A few weeks ago, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said the government might have to consider paying for the antimissile devices for United States commercial airlines. The missile threat, like many other potential terrorist threats, must be weighed carefully and taken in context. No one wants to rush into spending billions to defend against a gossamer threat. And certainly no single defensive system will eradicate the threat. But common sense dictates that if the technology works as advertised, an investment of $10 billion could pay huge dividends down the line.